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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000886

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: KING RENEWS CALLS FOR DECENTRALIZATION, GOVERNMENT
STALLS FOR TIME

REF: 08 AMMAN 3353

AMMAN 00000886 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. King Abdullah is ramping up pressure on Jordan's government and calling for movement on a 2004 plan to bring greater local control over provision of government services. PM Nader Al-Dahabi, a known opponent of decentralization, is publicly voicing his willingness to comply with the King's directives but putting off internal discussion of detailed implementation. Criticism of the plan in the media and governmental circles has been harsh. End Summary.

This Time, It's Personal

¶2. (C) Following a reshuffle of PM Dahabi's cabinet in late February, King Abdullah is once again pressuring the government for action on a controversial decentralization plan. Originally devised by royal committee in 2004, the decentralization program would create three regional authorities with the goal of increasing local control over government services (reftel). The King underscored the need for decentralization to boost government responsiveness to the needs of ordinary Jordanians during a March 2 meeting with community leaders. He then traveled to Madaba on March 10 with PM Dahabi and announced that the province (currently slated to be part of the central region) would be a test case for the plan's rollout in 2010.

¶3. (C) The King has attempted several times to advance decentralization, but it has been effectively scuttled by successive governments, which put it on the back burner. Jordan's political elite have indicated they fear the plan will give Jordan's Palestinian majority access to state resources at the expense of tribal East Bankers who currently control public sector jobs and state funding. They also assert that the plan would further complicate the delivery of services by creating a massive new layer of bureaucracy. Despite his known opposition to decentralization, PM Dahabi responded to the latest pronouncements by the King by announcing at a March 15 press conference his own intention to "fully implement" the plan.

Confusion Follows

¶4. (C) It remains unclear, however, what "full implementation" would really mean. Contacts in the government and parliament estimate that hundreds of laws would need to be amended if the King's plan was to be put into effect. Minister of Municipal Affairs Shihadeh Abu Hdeib said on March 18 that the decentralization plan would be presented to parliament during an expected summer

extraordinary session for "discussion," but there has so far been no indication of a government plan to change any laws. Working level contacts in Jordan's bureaucracy have described general confusion over the initiative. Ministries have been tasked with providing feedback to the royal commission on the concept of decentralization, but only have the vague and rather short 2004 report of the royal commission to go by. Conflicting reports in the media about the scope and details of decentralization have added to the problem.

Reaction

15. (U) Jordan's punditocracy has criticized the lack of coordination and vagueness of the plan. Ever since the King's March 2 statement, the media has asked that the government release further details about how the plan would be implemented. Several columnists noted that the plan focused on economic development at the expense of political reform. In a statement on its website on March 19, the Islamic Action Front branded the decentralization plan as "vague" and "flawed," but offered little in the way of a detailed critique or alternate plan. Others see decentralization as the result of U.S. pressure to make progress on domestic political reform, while failing to draw a concrete linkage between the two.

16. (SBU) Contacts and media commentary have also focused, as in the past, on how decentralization would facilitate a widespread conspiracy theory that foresees the incorporation of the West Bank into Jordan. As written, the decentralization plan would create three regional authorities which would take on many of the powers currently exercised by the central government. The plan's detractors say that the plan's ultimate aim is to add the West Bank as Jordan's

AMMAN 00000886 002.2 OF 002

fourth region. Despite repeated statements by PM Dahabi denying this, the rumor persists in the media and political salons.

Comment

17. (C) It remains unclear why the King is pushing for decentralization now. The plan would add an additional layer of bureaucracy to the government and presumably increase government operating costs with new offices and salaries even as the impact of the global financial crisis and declining aid inflows are starting to be felt. In the absence of a clear explanation, Jordan's political elite is turning to speculation and conspiracy theories about the motives for the plan. Without a more detailed explanation of his vision, the King's enthusiasm is unlikely to be matched by governmental bureaucrats who will have to implement his ideas.

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Beecroft